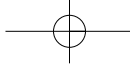


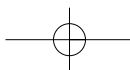
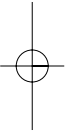
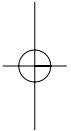
## Part II

# THE MODERN FRAMEWORK

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## Charles Boxer and the *Race Equivoque*

JOÃO DE PINA-CABRAL<sup>1</sup>

CHARLES BOXER'S BOOK *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415–1825* was published in 1963 – nearly half a century ago – and has continued to be read to this day. In contrast to his other works, this short essay has found a readership beyond the circle of those who are interested in the history of the Portuguese expansion. In fact, it constitutes a singular piece of analytical debate in the work of a writer who saw himself chiefly as a descriptive historian, bibliophile and archivist and who studiously avoided political posturing. The 1963 essay, however, was conceived from the start in a polemical mode and, according to his biographer, Boxer was perfectly conscious of the impact it would have as he produced it. The essay starts with a direct and explicit rebuttal of the more ideological formulations on race by the then Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar in support of his fascist and colonialist policies.

The furious response to the book from some of Boxer's former Portuguese and Brazilian colleagues is well known – chief among them, Armando Cortesão, a very close friend and collaborator, who felt deeply betrayed by Boxer's implicit distancing. There were also less extreme cases, such as that of Virgínia Rau, who responded with quiet sadness to Boxer's declaration of distance. Less well known, however, is that Boxer also touched nerves to the north of the Rio Grande. Many North American colleagues felt troubled about Boxer's obvious interest in, and even sometimes outright appreciation for, aspects of the history of the Portuguese empire. Even as late as the mid-1970s, Boxer's work was being rejected by American publishers on the grounds that editors (and I quote from a referee report) 'found themselves troubled by what appears to be a kind of defence of the

<sup>1</sup> This chapter was written during my stay as Tinker Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago in 2009. I am grateful to the Tinker Foundation, the Department of Anthropology, the Centre for Latin-American Studies, and the Regenstein Library, as well as to Keshia Fikes and to Dan Borges. I am grateful to Raffaella D'Intino and Omar Ribeiro Thomaz for their discussions of this topic with me.

Portuguese empire-builders. In view of subsequent events, particularly the dissolution of the empire, they felt this might strike some readers as a discordant note.<sup>2</sup> This was not an isolated instance, according to Dauril Alden's detailed personal biography, to which I am indebted for the following biographical notes.

### The historical context to Boxer's *Race Relations*

The circumstances of the writing of Boxer's book, therefore, deserve our attention. To my mind, they highlight in an interesting manner how the work constituted an almost unavoidable response both to deep changes in the life of the author and to the major ideological changes that were taking place all around him. Boxer was a third-generation descendant of British military men who had given their lives at a young age in the struggle for the attainment of world hegemony by the British empire. The whole first part of his life was very much guided by his sense of participation in the project of empire – he reached the rank of major in the British army and was closely associated with Japanese militarist circles during the pre-war years, at a time when the Japanese military were immersed in the violent colonial occupation of Korea and northern China.

It was the deeply troubling experience of the Second World War, and the lapse into irrelevance of the earlier forms of imperialism based on extensive territorial administration, that led Boxer to rethink his earlier views of empire – as happened with so many British intellectuals of his generation. In fact, in Boxer's case, the change was gradual and was marked by deeply formative experiences shortly before and during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, in which he played a prominent and public role, first as a member of the British intelligence and, subsequently, as a military prisoner in Canton, having been convicted for attempted escape.

In Boxer's case, his relationship with an American writer, Emily Hahn, his second wife, and his eventual stay in the United States during an important period of his creative life, were marked influences. In fact, as Emily herself wrote to a friend as early as 1947, 'Charles is madly in love with America'. When his appointment at King's College as Camoens Professor was coming to an end in the early 1960s, it became possible for him to contemplate acting upon his dream of moving to the United States, where his wife was by then a permanent resident in Manhattan (they kept house apart for long periods of their marriage). It is significant, for example, that right to his final days he kept to the habit of offering a party to friends and associates on Pearl Harbour Day, to celebrate the entry of the United States into the war.

<sup>2</sup> Dauril Alden, *Charles R. Boxer: An Uncommon Life: Soldier, Historian, Teacher, Collector, Traveller* (Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2001), p. 568.

1 From 1962 he started carrying out regular and extended lecture tours in the  
2 United States. In 1964, he started formal negotiations concerning the sale of his  
3 valuable collection of books and manuscripts about the European expansion to the  
4 Lilly Library in the University of Indiana, Bloomington, with a view to an appoint-  
5 ment there. He moved to Bloomington in 1967.<sup>3</sup> Earlier on, in 1964, he had been  
6 a candidate for a post at Harvard which he lost to a specialist on a topic felt to be  
7 less contentious by the appointment committee: Spanish imperial history. He was  
8 to keep his association with Bloomington until the middle of the following decade,  
9 even though he held a prestigious position as Professor of the Expansion of Europe  
10 Overseas from the Fall of 1969 to 1972 at the University of Yale. During his stay  
11 there, he acted as Master of Saybrook College for a year, which happened to be  
12 one of the especially intense years of student riots. In particular, he was forced to  
13 adjudicate in complex and violent student confrontations due to 'Black/White  
14 tension', as he described it. He returned to Indiana in 1972 where he stayed until  
15 1979 when, on turning 75, he finally retired to his house in southern England.

16 This information is of concern if we see that *Race Relations* accompanied him  
17 right throughout this period in a very significant way. The first glimpses of the  
18 argument emerged in the second of a set of three lectures on the Portuguese  
19 expansion that Boxer delivered in 1960 at the University of Witwatersrand in  
20 Johannesburg (my own *alma mater*), entitled 'The Clash of Colour. Caste and Creed  
21 in the Sixteenth Century'. Jorge Dias was to deliver a set of lectures there the  
22 following year.<sup>4</sup>

23 That the lectures were delivered in Johannesburg in 1960 is not an irrelevant  
24 fact. That year, two events occurred that called attention to the need to rethink  
25 earlier approaches to the subject: first, in March of that year, as a sequel to public  
26 protest against the 'pass laws' which constituted the principal instrument of  
27 enforcing racial segregation in South Africa, a massacre by the police took place  
28 in Sharpeville, which marked the transformation of the apartheid regime into an  
29 international pariah and led to an important exodus of white opponents from the  
30 country; secondly, at the end of the year, the Portuguese government, feeling that  
31 it was in need of boosting its international credit, organised a major academic and  
32 political event in honour of Prince Henry the Navigator, where Boxer was one of  
33 the principal speakers and where Brazil's President, Juscelino Kubitschek, played  
34 an important and visible role. These were, in fact, troubled days internationally,  
35 not only in Africa but also in the United States and Brazil – where, for example,  
36 the students of the newly formed National University of Brasilia went on strike.

37 Indeed, the winds of change had already been blowing for a number of years.  
38 In 1955–6 the famous bus boycott took place in the United States out of which  
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40 <sup>3</sup> Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, pp. 454–62.

41 <sup>4</sup> Jorge Dias, *Portuguese Contributions to Cultural Anthropology* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand  
42 University Press, 1961).

Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as a national leader and which ended legal segregation in public transportation in the United States. The year 1963, which saw the publication of *Race Relations*, was the year of King's major success, the Peaceful March on Washington, where he delivered the speech about his dreams of an egalitarian future that all of us have heard and learnt from.

Elsewhere, in April 1955, the Bandung conference had been convened in Indonesia. There, leaders such as Nehru and Zhu Enlai assumed centre stage internationally, taking a forceful stand against territorial colonialism. India's pressure on Portugal to abandon the *Estado da Índia* (its colonial possessions in the sub-continent) started to mount after 1958 and, in 1961, India assumed control of the territories unilaterally by military means. The liberation movements in the Portuguese African colonies were also gaining strength during the late 1950s from their base in Algiers. The actual colonial war started in Angola in 1961, to be followed in subsequent years by the other anti-colonial movements. In 1961 also, Henrique Galvão and his associates staged the internationally famous hijacking of the liner *Santa Maria*.

There is little to surprise us in the fact that, in 1960, in the middle of all this, the odd combination of contrast and similarity between the Portuguese colonial regimes in southern Africa and the South African and Rhodesian regimes should present itself to Boxer as an intellectual and ethical challenge, forcing him to address openly the matter of race relations in the Portuguese empire. Peter Fry's recent essays on the topic, in his book *A persistência da raça*, and the polemics that accompanied it, show beyond any doubt that we are far from having exhausted the theme.<sup>5</sup> As it happens, the debate was hardly virgin territory, as Fry has argued in his article on the meanings of race in Brazil published in *Daedalus* in 2000:

since the days of slavery, well before modern globalization, 'race relations', real or imagined, in Brazil and the United States, have been held as contrasting models that in a sense have come to define for many the two national identities.<sup>6</sup>

In his book, Boxer globalised the debate in a clear and timely response to what was happening all around him. His innovations were, on the one hand, to include a third party in the race debate (Africa), and on the other, that he cast the race issue in terms of the whole history of Portuguese expansion.

The essay itself started to take its final shape in November 1962 when Boxer delivered a set of lectures on race relations at the University of Virginia. He then proceeded to lecture on the same topic at Cornell and Harvard in the same year. According to his biographer, the lectures caused a sensation in Harvard. This led

<sup>5</sup> Peter Fry, *A persistência da raça: Ensaios antropológicos sobre o Brasil e a África Austral* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Fry, 'Brazil: The Burden of the Past; the Promise of the Future', *Daedalus* 129:2 (2000), pp. 83–118, see p. 84.

1 to his being invited to apply for the Gardiner professorship, and eventually also to  
 2 his not receiving the appointment, as we have seen.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, it was the topic of  
 3 the day. Throughout his stay in the United States in the 1970s – at Bloomington,  
 4 then Yale, later Virginia, and Bloomington again – the lectures on race formed the  
 5 core of his teaching engagements.

6 If we set *Race Relations* – the book – against this backdrop, we see how it  
 7 constituted an indispensable intellectual tool for its author. It provided Boxer with  
 8 a much needed instrument of mediation between what he knew of the history of  
 9 the Portuguese expansion and the upcoming discourse on race that was becoming  
 10 hegemonic internationally and that was so deeply marked by the emergent black  
 11 struggle in the United States. In the course of the 1950s, and then suddenly with  
 12 enormous impact in 1960–1, a new race discourse forced itself on the international  
 13 scene which made nonsense of the background assumptions that had underwritten  
 14 the history of European imperialism until the Second World War and that the  
 15 Portuguese authorities had wanted to salvage by means of the commemorations of  
 16 Prince Henry the Navigator. These were no longer the days of the 1940s, when the  
 17 imperial celebrations in Belém produced such a favourable impact internationally.<sup>8</sup>

18 The sympathy towards the early Renaissance empire builders that had char-  
 19 acterised British elite attitudes in the heyday of the British empire, and which had  
 20 been the principal driving force behind Boxer's own youthful fascination with  
 21 Dutch and Portuguese naval bravery, became utterly untenable in the light of the  
 22 dominant opinion in the United States in the early 1960s. If he was to carry his  
 23 scholarship to the world's leading intellectual centres, Boxer had to produce a  
 24 mediating mechanism that allowed for the ideological transformation of his earlier  
 25 historical engagements into contemporary discourse. This he did notably well in  
 26 his 1963 essay, both to his profit and his honour.

27 There was a price to pay, however, on both sides of the mediation. At the same  
 28 time as he demonstrated that the history of Portuguese expansion had indeed been  
 29 marked by racism, he was also led to state repeatedly that this was of a less marked  
 30 nature than other forms of imperial racism and was characterised by greater  
 31 ambiguity of race classification. He found it hard to hide his fascination and respect  
 32 for many of the historical figures he described. To many in the United States, this  
 33 was seen as a problematic position to assume. For his American contemporaries,  
 34 racism was conceived both as of a single piece and as an evil, which was more  
 35 easily dealt with in its purest form – somewhat on the lines of what Christian Geffray  
 36 defended in *Lusotopie* much later.<sup>9</sup> The argument is implicit in practically all  
 37 writings on the issue by North American colleagues right up to our day.

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 39 <sup>7</sup> Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, p. 454.

40 <sup>8</sup> See Omar Ribeiro Thomaz, *Ecos do Atlântico Sul: Representações sobre o Terceiro Império Português*  
 41 (Rio de Janeiro: Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2002).

42 <sup>9</sup> Christian Geffray, 'Le Lusotropicalisme comme discours de l'amour dans la servitude', *Lusotopie*  
 (1997), pp. 361–72.

This is how Talcott Parsons famously put it in 1969:

Relatively sharper polarization clearly favours conflict and antagonism in the first instance. Providing, however, other conditions are fulfilled, sharp polarization seems in the longer run to be more favourable to effective inclusion than is a complex grading of the differences between components, perhaps particularly where gradations are arranged on a superiority-inferiority hierarchy. To put cases immediately in point, I take the position that the race relations problem has a better prospect of resolution in the United States than in Brazil, partly because the line between white and Negro has been so rigidly drawn in the United States and because the system has been sharply polarized.<sup>10</sup>

Note that, in this quote, he writes ‘white’ with a small letter and ‘Negro’ with a capital letter – a point that will later become relevant in my argument.

On the other side of the polemics, however, Boxer’s mediation implied the painful loss of some of his closer intellectual allies. By then, as it turns out, he had no choice if he was to avoid becoming an anachronistic monument to a bygone age of empire. His resigned response to Armando Cortesão’s fury on being betrayed reveals that Boxer was fully conscious that time was on his side. He had to find the way to transport himself to the new language of empire that had become globally dominant in the post-war period with the onset of the Cold War and, particularly, around the youth struggles that accompanied the Vietnam War. These essays on race relations, therefore, were the lectures that he delivered to his students in the American campuses at Yale, Virginia and Bloomington precisely during those mutinous years. After all, he was to move from Bloomington to Yale the year after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. There was no way he could have lived there and avoided the issue.

It is probably necessary at this point to state clearly that, as read in terms of mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American views about race (what it constitutes and what it implies), the claim by the Portuguese dictator and his collaborators in the 1960s that the Portuguese were not historically prone to practise acts of racism made little or no sense at all. Thus, I want to leave no doubt that, as far as I can see, Boxer’s claims in 1963 were, on the whole, correct. Moreover, his essay is based on a thorough knowledge of the history he surveys, as he was at the time the foremost historian of the subject.

Why, then, are we revisiting his arguments in this volume? Again, to my mind, there does not seem to be much evidence to overturn the observations he makes about his material. Rather, it seems necessary to set his writing in historical perspective, simply because the world and its hegemonies have changed and the context that gave relevance to his lectures is now a thing of the past – much as the

<sup>10</sup> Talcott Parsons, ‘The Problem of Polarization on the Axis of Color’, in John Hope Franklin (ed.), *Color and Race* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 349–73, see pp. 352–3; quoted in Fry, ‘Brazil: The Burden of the Past’, p. 95.



hegemony of colonialist ideologies of empire that had ruled up to the 1930s had become a thing of the past when he wrote his own essay in the early 1960s.

### Cross-cultural mis-readings

What had Boxer come to discover then that his earlier close friends and collaborators in Portugal, Brazil and India had not discovered? What were the new facts that caused their distancing? It would seem that the answer is: none. There was nothing new that Boxer now unearthed and that Cortesão, Rau or their Brazilian colleagues had not known before.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to what global hegemonic trends at the time made it appear, it was not the Portuguese who were newly engaged in a major error of judgement in the 1960s; rather, it was Boxer and his Anglo-American colleagues who, in the course of the post-war decade, had changed their minds. Their world-view had changed aspect, bringing further into focus the previously less noticeable fact that Portuguese and Brazilian discourses of power were not compatible with the new language of power that had become dominant during the Cold War period.

The difference of opinion, however, was not a recent or a simple thing. Manifestations of cross-cultural mis-readings had made their impact for a very long time. They simply had not assumed the historical centrality that they did at the time of Portuguese late-colonialism – 1961 to 1974. Much like the case of South Africa, whilst the Portuguese colonial regime in Africa was still sustained by American military and financial support as part of the Cold War strategy, its ideological framework had become untenable in terms of dominant American public opinion.

By mid-century, the need for a mediating mechanism was not felt uniquely by Boxer. Even the Portuguese regime saw that it required a new ideological framework to respond to this new cause of embarrassment. Under the inspiration of the then youthful Adriano Moreira, the regime elected to pick on Gilberto Freyre's work from the 1920s in order to attempt to regain its legitimacy. It failed miserably in this, however, for a number of reasons which are, on the whole, beyond the reach of the present essay. To my mind, however, the most prominent of these was the fact that internal fascist repression in Portugal stunted the mid-century generation, forcing the livelier members to migrate, and thus preventing it from carrying out the vigorous renegotiation of positions that would have allowed for a decisive and creative political evolution both in Portugal and in Africa.

The source of the mis-reading, however, long antedates the mid-twentieth century. The 1920s were the period when American attitudes concerning race

<sup>11</sup> Francisco Bethencourt has called my attention to the fact that Armando Cortesão was by then one of the few remaining allies of Salazar within the Republican right wing, due to his earlier engagements in the colonial project.

started to be exported globally. This happened very importantly even within the British empire. For example, the intellectual mould that produced the apartheid regime in South Africa in the 1930s was not primarily German Nazi ideology, as has so often been assumed. To the contrary, the decisive influence on apartheid's main ideologue, Henrik F. Vervoerd, were the Carnegie Foundation and sociologists T. Sorokin from Harvard and Charles Coulter from Ohio, as well as their social psychologist colleagues then engaged in developing what they called 'social engineering'.<sup>12</sup> Again, leaving out of the debate developments in Africa and Asia would seriously reduce the possibility of understanding what was at stake. It is to Boxer's credit that he saw this plainly.

On the western side of the Atlantic, the emergence of a growing divergence of opinion between North American and Brazilian activists and intellectuals can be traced through the pages of the São Paulo 'Black press' from the end of the First World War.<sup>13</sup> Speaking of an article by José do Patrocínio Filho written in 1923, Micol Seigel writes,

this clear-sighted critique of the idea of racial democracy, fully aware of its differential significance abroad and in Brazil, predates by ten years [Freyre's book] that would supposedly introduce this myth [. . .]. Afro-Brazilians generated the idea of racial democracy right alongside its critique.<sup>14</sup>

Even as the author notes this fact, she is engaged in a play of words that turns Patrocínio's argument into a case of blatant false consciousness. She goes on to state, 'today most observers see the idea of racial democracy as a reactionary erasure of racism and social inequality, but in the twenties its final violence was far from clear'.<sup>15</sup> Again, the ambiguity of the word 'idea' allows for a play of meaning where the difference between an observation of fact and a political ideal to fight for is comfortably erased.

In fact, whether in the 1920s, the 1950s, or today, no informed observer ever doubted that racism based on colour and culture played an important role in Brazil or, as a matter of fact, throughout the other contexts of Portuguese expansion in Asia or Africa.<sup>16</sup> Boxer's use of Salazar's speeches in his essay was but a rhetorical gesture, much, indeed, as were the speeches themselves. By the mid-twentieth century, even people like Boxer or Henrique Galvão who, in the 1920s, had been close to Portuguese right-wing circles, came to realise that the Portuguese dictator

<sup>12</sup> Roberta B. Miller, 'Science and Society in the Early Career of H. F. Vervoerd', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19:4 (1993), pp. 634–61.

<sup>13</sup> See Micol Seigel, *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Seigel, *Uneven Encounters*, p. 194.

<sup>15</sup> Seigel, *Uneven Encounters*, p. 209.

<sup>16</sup> See Ricardo Ventura Santos *et al.*, 'Colour, Race and Genomic Ancestry in Brazil: Dialogues between Anthropology and Genetics', *Current Anthropology* 50:6 (2009), pp. 805–6.

1 meant no good by his paternalistic claims of love for his subjects. Galvão's writings  
 2 from his Brazilian exile after 1947 leave amply clear that Portuguese colonialism  
 3 at mid-century was racist, immoral and economically deleterious both for Portugal  
 4 and for the territories it administered in Africa.<sup>17</sup>

5 Speaking of the black activists in the São Paulo press of the 1920s, Seigel finds  
 6 that there is 'a paradox of a nationalist denial of a Brazilian racism by an anti-  
 7 racist Afro-identified subject'.<sup>18</sup> But the paradox is purely a matter of perspective:  
 8 that is, Seigel's *own* incapacity or unwillingness to rise above North American  
 9 definitions of race as blackness and of ethnicity as based on Diaspora. It would be  
 10 immediately resolved should she attempt seriously to reconstitute her subject's  
 11 perspectival difference. Indeed, it might seem incoherent or absurd that, and I quote  
 12 again, 'alongside every profession of patriotism and praise for Brazil's lack of  
 13 racism ran denunciations of perfectly concrete instances of prejudice'.<sup>19</sup> It would  
 14 indeed be incoherent if the background assumption were Talcott Parsons' kind of  
 15 segregationist ideal. But if, on the contrary, the background assumption were a legal  
 16 and religious tradition based on assimilationist ideals, the paradox immediately  
 17 vanishes. In both cases, either Parsons and Seigel, or Patrocínio and Freyre, it is  
 18 less a question of what is than of what should be; not a matter of ideas but of ideals.

19 Brazilian race activists and intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s felt that they  
 20 had to protect the important political capital that the assimilationist legal tradition  
 21 constituted. As Peter Fry reminds us,

22           in Brazil, racial discrimination is and has been illegal since the inauguration of the  
 23           republican regime in 1890. In the United States, 'race' was, until the civil rights  
 24           movement of the 1960s, a legal construct that divided the population along 'racial'  
 25           lines in all spheres of social life.<sup>20</sup>

26           Indeed, this is the sentiment that guided Gilberto Freyre's thesis presented at  
 27           the University of Columbia as a student of Franz Boas and written in the late 1920s  
 28           – which formed the basis of *Casa-grande e senzala*.<sup>21</sup> Much like Vervoerd's  
 29           wholehearted adoption of American conceptions of social engineering in sociology  
 30           and social psychology, Freyre's book must also be read as a response to the growing  
 31           global impact of American intellectual opinion during that period (in his case a far  
 32           more humane version of it, as enshrined in American anthropological theory).  
 33           Whoever has read the book surely cannot forget that the formative experience that  
 34           is at the root of its writing is one of painful confrontation with an instance of  
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36  
 37 <sup>17</sup> See João de Pina-Cabral, 'Galvão among the Cannibals: The Emotional Constitution of Colonial  
 38 Power', *Identities* 8:4 (2001), pp. 483–515.

39 <sup>18</sup> Seigel, *Uneven Encounters*, p. 191.

40 <sup>19</sup> Seigel, *Uneven Encounters*, p. 192.

41 <sup>20</sup> Fry, 'Brazil: The Burden of the Past', p. 86.

42 <sup>21</sup> Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-grande e senzala; Formação da família brasileira sob o regimen de economia patriarcal* (1933; Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1998).

collective subalternity. The band of Brazilian sailors whom Freyre saw in Manhattan and whose blatant 'inferiority' as a specimen of humanity was so painful to him, forced him to question the mould that made him feel that way. In order to do so, he had to bypass the hegemony of white supremacy and the racial binarism that shored it up. In fact, had he known it, he would have had to recognise that the history of the Brazilian navy during that period displayed signal and courageous instances of direct struggle against racist violence.<sup>22</sup>

In short, after nearly a century of systematic misunderstanding, it would seem that Boxer's solution in pointing to the fact that Salazar was wrong that there was no racism and discrimination in the history of the Portuguese expansion will not resolve the issue. Perhaps the solution does not lie even in study of the evidence that points to the existence of racial prejudice and discrimination in Lusophone countries, or to the existence of a legal and religious system that favours assimilationism as opposed to one that favours segregationism as in the United States. If either of these solutions were sufficient, they would already have yielded results and there would be no matter to debate presently. In the polemics that have recently re-emerged in the pages of *Current Anthropology* (Ventura Santos *et al.*) or in books such as Micol Seigel's, it seems amply evident to me that the problem lies in our very dependence on the North American emic concept of 'race' as the definitional axis of a comparison that breaches two very distinct intellectual and religious traditions. This furthers cross-cultural mis-reading rather than resolving it.

### A plurality of 'races'

It should be clear by now, then, that since the 1920s, all of these debates have been marked by an increasingly dominant semantic shift in the use of the word 'race'. We should be alerted to this, for example, by Talcott Parsons' use of words in the quotation above. There, he writes 'Negro' with a capital but 'white' with small letters, thus implying that Negro is being used as a proper noun – that is, the label of an ethnic group – whilst 'white' is used adjectivally to describe a skin type.

Whilst the category 'race' presents itself definitionally as describing all kinds of human biological and/or cultural difference, the word in fact is used more appositely when it describes the condition of a specific 'people': blacks or Negroes, as they were then called. In turn, these are taken to be a distinct ethnic group with clearly determined collective interests. Moreover, as an ethnic group, they are defined by a myth of origin: their ancestry of slaves coming from a generalised Africa. Finally, the debates always focus on the United States in relation to another single country (usually Brazil or South Africa, but more recently in the writings

<sup>22</sup> See '*a revolta da chibata*' ('the revolt of the lash'); Maria Inês Roland, *A Revolta da Chibata* (São Paulo: Editora Saraiva, 2000).

of psychologists also China)<sup>23</sup> rather than triangulating the gamut of differences as Charles Boxer had shown to be necessary. This was the category to which Boxer necessarily had to adapt his argument if he was going to be able to teach in the United States.

The best formulation I know of this point is the famous debate between Cornel West, a professor at Harvard who has made a name for himself as a race activist and scholar, and Jorge Klor de Alva, again a prestigious university professor who is a spokesperson for Latino identity in the United States. The debate started when the latter questioned the former as to whether he was indeed 'black'. West's response was:

I think when I say I am a black man, I am saying first that I am a modern person, because black itself is a modern construct, a construct put forward during a particular moment in time to fit a specific set of circumstances. Implicit in that category of 'black man' is American white supremacy, African slavery and then a very rich culture that responds to these conditions at the level of style, mannerism, orientation, experimentation, improvisation, syncopation – all of these elements that have gone into making a new people, namely, black people.<sup>24</sup>

The collective category 'black man' is being used here in an ethnic sense – at least that is how an anthropologist would see it<sup>25</sup> – not in a racial sense, and that is why it makes no sense for Cornel West that Klor de Alva should contest that, going by his skin, he would not be black in Africa. That surely is not the point for him. We are here reminded of Livio Sansone's book on black identity in Brazil where, after a lengthy study of the material available, he concludes that there is indeed such a thing as black identity in Brazil (*negritude*, as he calls it), but it does not shape itself into an ethnic category, since there is no single ethnic group that is formed by it.<sup>26</sup> Sansone's argument remains valuable today even though one might disagree with him concerning the presumption that all ethnicity is necessarily formed in terms of clearly delineated interest groups; in terms of a 'people' of some sort.

Later on in the published report of the debate between West and his Latino conversant the following interaction occurs, which I think highlights what is at stake:

**Klor de Alva:** [. . .] We have in the United States, two mechanisms at play in the construction of collective identities. One is to identify folks from a cultural

<sup>23</sup> See D. J. Kelly *et al.*, 'Development of the Other-Race Effect during Infancy: Evidence toward Universality?' *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 104 (2009), pp. 105–14.

<sup>24</sup> Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), p. 500.

<sup>25</sup> See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Livio Sansone, *Negritude sem etnicidade: O local e o global nas relações raciais e na produção da cultura negra do Brasil* (Salvador and Rio de Janeiro: EDUFBA/Pallas, 2004).

perspective. The other is to identify them from a racial perspective. Now, with the exception of black-white relations, the racial perspective is not the most critical for most folks. The cultural perspective was, at one time, very sharply drawn, including the religious line between Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Protestants, Jews and Catholics, Jews and Christians. But in the course of the twentieth century, we have seen in the United States a phenomenon that we do not see any place else in the world – the capacity to blur the differences between these cultural groups, to construct them in such a way that they become insignificant and to fuse them into a new group called whites, which didn't exist before.

**West:** Yes, but whiteness was already in place. I mean, part of the tragedy of American civilization is precisely the degree to which the stability and continuity of American democracy has been predicated on a construct of whiteness that includes the subordination of black people, so that European cultural diversity could disappear into American whiteness while black folk remained subordinate.<sup>27</sup>

West was referring here indirectly to the arguments he developed in his essay on 'A Genealogy of Modern Racism' which has been so widely read and quoted in the United States.<sup>28</sup> There, he argues in favour of a historicist perspective on racial domination. He traces the history of modern racism to the sixteenth century, but he insists that it must be understood in terms of a neo-classical recovery of Greek models of beauty and of human perfection. I find the argument persuasive but it seems to me that there is a dangerous side to it, since it hides a complex series of local conditioning factors. These need illuminating if we are going to make sense of the contemporary global significance of the concept of 'race'.

Indeed, models of corporeal 'whiteness' have been with the European imperialists since the very beginning. Thus, for example, one of the reactions of the Portuguese who arrived in China in the mid-sixteenth century, after over half a century of commercial and military expansion across the coast of Africa and India, was fascination at the relative whiteness of Chinese and Japanese women. Due to this, such women were fetching higher prices in the Asian slave market at the time.<sup>29</sup>

This example might suggest that Cornel West is correct in his opinions concerning the centrality of Greco-Roman classical values of corporality at the onset of the modern era. Matters, however, are far more complex. Much like what happened with African religion, the Portuguese response to these questions was hardly one of imperial distance and rejection – as was to be the case, a little later, with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant empire builders – but rather one of negotiated creolisation. We have evidence of this type of response both from the period of initial contact (see Sansi-Roca's interestingly new history of the use

<sup>27</sup> West, *The Cornel West Reader*, p. 504.

<sup>28</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 47–68.

<sup>29</sup> See João de Pina-Cabral, *Between China and Europe: Person, Culture and Emotion in Macao* (New York: Continuum/Berg, 2002), p. 114; P<sup>o</sup> Manuel Teixeira, *O comércio de escravos em Macau/The So-Called Trade in Slaves in Macao* (Macao: Imprensa Nacional, 1976).

of 'fetish' on the West Coast of Africa)<sup>30</sup> and from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Brazil – where James Sweet, for example, amply demonstrates that 'the impact of Christianity on Africans was no greater than the impact of African beliefs on Christians'.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, in matters of skin colour in South and Southeast Asia (as much as in Brazil), things did not turn out to be as linear as one might have thought. Portuguese men of the period apparently preferred as conjugal partners the darker-hued pre-Islamic Malay women, on the supposition that Chinese women, albeit whiter, had much greater difficulty in adopting Christianity. This, incidentally, is held to explain why, over four centuries later, Macanese Eurasian cuisine is still so deeply marked by Malay cooking styles.

Now, when we compare South African attitudes to 'race' with American attitudes, one major difference should immediately be recognised – one that we can only choose to disregard at the peril of reproducing large areas of hegemonic shadow. To put it as simply as possible, in South Africa, 'blackness' was not the issue, but rather 'whiteness', for the simple reason that black people were too diverse and the category included people who were not necessarily African (such as 'Coloureds' – who were supposed to have a large percentage of Malay ancestry; Indians – who were not African at all; and even other kinds of Africans – such as Khoi-San peoples). Africanness and blackness, furthermore, could not be conjoined and that is what the term *Afrikaans* (to describe those who, in Spanish America, would have been called *criollos*) was meant to imply. What was at stake was a dispute over Africa, not a matter of skin colour, and there was, furthermore, no implication of slavery and dislocation. Thus, 'non-whiteness' was the prevailing metaphor.

In the United States, on the other hand, 'blackness', slavery and dislocation conjoined. Whiteness, as we have seen, was a hold-all produced out of a dispersed set of categories that supposedly mirrored an ever increasingly certain blackness. The discourse of Africanness, it should be remembered, was a response to this, and emerged coevally with the hold-all whiteness to which Klor de Alva and West refer in their debate. It had to be intellectually constructed at mid-century when it became clear that the 'melting-pot' was not going to include the blacks – precisely at the same time as American intellectuals were becoming more influential abroad. Africanness had to be fought for in the United States and some (such as Frazier, the most eminent Afro-American sociologist of the time) did not feel it deserved support; thus it created rifts among the different contenders in the United States

<sup>30</sup> Roger Sansi-Roca, 'The Fetish in the Lusophone Atlantic', in Nancy Naro, Roger Sansi-Roca and David Treece (eds), *Cultures of the Lusophone Black Atlantic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 19–39.

<sup>31</sup> James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 230.

itself. The apparent transparency of many concepts that have become common parlance today – such as Seigel’s ‘Afro-diasporic identity’, which she retro-projects to the opinions of her subjects in the 1920s – relies on specific processes of ideological production that were never consolidated until much later. Some of the complexities that the definition of blackness by reference to African Diaspora throws up are well delineated, for example, in a recent text by Stanford Carpenter, a young black American anthropologist,<sup>32</sup> and it is significant that, according to his biographer, Charles Boxer knew Melville Herskovits and was influenced by him at the time of his American stay.

In fact, one notes again that the silent contender, the unstated referential background that gives the point to the arguments of recent books like James Sweet’s on the cultural legacy of African slaves in Brazil or Micol Seigel’s on early twentieth-century black activists, is the American-specific category of ‘race’. To sum up, first, the category shapes itself as applying specifically to blacks rather than to other racial groups; secondly, blacks are seen to be an ethnic group with defined collective interests; and thirdly, they are defined by a generic origin in Africa.

Whilst Boxer found in the race discourse an instrument of mediation that allowed him to continue to develop his favoured topics of research in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, then, the polemic that the book met with does not seem to have been resolved. It is perhaps possible today to throw new light on what caused such a longstanding cross-cultural mis-interpretation.

<sup>32</sup> See his interesting self-biographical account: Stanford Carpenter, ‘What We Bring to the Table: The Means of Imagination in an African American Family’, in James Faubion (ed.), *The Ethics of Kinship: Ethnographic Inquiries* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).